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"THE MIDDLE YEARS BETWEEN, 'I WAS  
YOUNG,' AND 'NOW I AM OLD'"

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A SERMON  
BY  
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## “THE MIDDLE YEARS BETWEEN ‘I WAS YOUNG’ AND ‘NOW I AM OLD’”

“In the midway of this, our mortal life,  
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray,  
Gone from the path direct.”

—DANTE.

People generally are interested in us while we are children. A survey of the world's literary remains would bear witness that childhood has had a fair share of attention. Some of the world's oldest tales are for children or about them. They are often in evidence in the fields of art and religion. Psychologists have studied the working of their minds, their point of view, their peculiar needs and difficulties. This is a good insistence and the end is not yet, but increases as we go on. This has been called the age of the child.

Adolescence, too, has been much in evidence, and of late we have increased our interest in this period of life. The earliest tribes had their appropriate rites placing in the hands of youth the implements of the chase and of war in recognition that manhood was upon them. The earliest religions had their ceremonies and their oaths; chivalry and knighthood had their appropriate rituals to mark the adolescent years when the responsibilities of life were entered. Most of our higher education is devised for this stage and its difficulties. Organizations now cover the land with trained leaders and studied programs for the needs and prom-

ises of youth. Both education and religion think this the most strategic time for their ends.

Old age has come in for its share of attention and honor. Early men made much of it. Interest in the old had a large place in the earliest systems of religion. Their treatment was the test of morality and excellence. The gods noted those who were negligent about people when they are old.

One surveying the interests of men and the literature of the human race might well ask, "What becomes of people in the years between?" Human beings are not always children and they are not children very long. They are not at adolescence very long, in fact they are soon into it and soon out of it. One might ask, "What of people in these years between, 'I was young,' and, 'Now I am old'?" One might think from the meagerness of the literary remains and of contemporary mention that this is a hibernating period into which we sink after we cease to be interesting as children and youth and out of which we emerge when we come to be interesting again when we are old. In this long stretch between, when men and women live much of their lives, is there no characteristic philosophy? Are there no urgent needs, no great difficulties? That is, the middle years have they nothing of problems that might concern the psychologist? Is the middle stretch so self-sufficient that it calls for nothing from those who study to help in times of special need? Is this time so uneventful and so drab that it has nothing for

poetry and song? What of life between the prospective years of youth and the reminiscent years of age?

For our approach, let us take a passage from Gerhart Hauptmann's "Atlantis." "The lives of unusual men from decade to decade, it seems, enter dangerous crises, in which one of two things takes place; either the morbid matter that has been accumulating is thrown off, or the organism succumbs to its actual material death, or in spiritual death. One of the most important, and to the observer, most remarkable of these crises occurs in the early thirties or forties, rarely before thirty, in fact, more frequently not until thirty-five and later. It is the great trial balance of life, which one would rather defer as long as it is expedient than make prematurely. It was in such a crisis that Goethe went on his Italian journey, that Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg, that Loyola hung his weapons in front of an image of the Virgin, never to take them down again, and that Jesus was nailed to the cross."

To these might be added the name of Paul. With all these the first trial balance brings not a transition but a break with life as it had been before. Neither came to his full power in the field in which he had worked up to this first self-reckoning. Goethe had been a barrister, though not a good one; Loyola had been a soldier, though not a good one; Luther had been a Dominican monk, though not a good one. Paul had

been a persecutor of the church and a thorough one. In the case of Jesus we have no after with which to compare what went before. He died in the great decision. We can speculate only on what his middle years would have been, whether or not the change would have been as marked as with the other four with whom his name here is linked.

Those who know much about us, have admonished us along the same line and they have named the same time, early in the thirties. They tell us that we are not so much the stuff of which dreams are made as we are of the stuff that loses its mobility. They tell us not of a time of crisis but of a time of getting set. They remind us of substances that have to be handled in haste. There is a time to work rapidly. They liken us unto these substances. After they harden we have to chip off and polish with much labor what we had only to mould easily into the desired shape before. They warn us that in the thirties we set and will not soften again. Whatever we shall need, it behooves us, if we are prudent, to get it before that time. Whatever we want to do easily after that time we ought to get before that time. In whatever way we wish to be fixed, and set and mechanical and rigid, we ought to look to it then. They tell us that this applies all the way from the use of our fingers, to our minds and our morals.

Contemporary literature, some of the novelists and some of the dramatists, at least have recognized that there are middle years with their difficulties and their

peculiar philosophy which are not just the difficulties and the philosophy of hopeful youth or of reminiscent age. These contemporary writers may not have the solution. Indeed they have not. They simply state the case. Art does not have solutions. It deals with the raw material of human life in the middle years, the conflicting standards, emotions, desires, the lures and the lusts and the elemental things. Contemporary literature and drama deal much with the conflicts of the middle years, especially in the matters of sex and marriage. They do not reach conclusions or place their stamp of approval on those whose affairs they record. Pinero tells us what happened to a few people in "Mid-Channel." Ibsen tells what happened to a number of others. Neither says that this is the way to live. They say to society, to education, to religion, to all our institutions, "Here is life as it comes to some. These are some of the people you have to reckon with. Here is one cross section for you. Remedy this, change it, prevent it, so that it is no longer life to them and no longer desired. Do this if you can."

The significant thing about these conflicts of the middle years, as expressed in our contemporary literature, is not that so many read it and are shocked by it, but, that so many think they see in it the statement of their own cases, and their own difficulties, and stated with a candor, a nakedness, a shamelessness of mind and soul to which they are not accustomed.

The middle years, if they are different, have some reason to be. The great choices of life have been made. Much that once was before has passed over into the background. It is not looked forward to, touched with great possibilities, but is looked back to from the view point of present actuality. Life is here

with whatever these choices and circumstances have brought, a satisfying actuality or not. This passing over from the time when the great choices are still to make, to the time where they have been made, requires a change of mind to fit a change of fact. Some keep silent about it and some shout out in rebel spirit how they feel about it.

The middle years bring one for the first time a part of himself against which to stand and to compare himself. He has not only the history of the race, and the history of his country, and of his family with which to compare himself, but also he has a former part of his own life with which to compare his life as it now is.

This gives two possibilities. One may have great satisfaction in the comparison. How wisely he has chosen and how well he has moved along from his first years with no bad choices, no great and life burdening mistakes. Perhaps this is the normal feeling of people looking back at the middle years over the way they have come. Let us hope that it is. The other possibility is that one may feel regret. Robert Louis Stevenson says, "There is not much regret in a good outfit," but there is considerable of it in many outfits. There is a regret of actuality, and a regret of imagination.

The regret of actuality is over real things left undone or done, the lack of which, or the effects of which become evident in the middle years. Sometimes it is wild oats getting ripe, the aftermath of youth's hot haste trailing itself across the years. Sometimes it is regret over things omitted, the wide embarrassing gaps in one's knowledge, the things he could have known and has needed to know and does not know. There are gaps in his appreciation of things. They are dead to him. They leave him untouched and unmoved.

There is regret for the days that are gone when he could have made himself responsive. Life does not give him the time now, and the processes of acquiring are not so keen and so alert. The time is upon him when mind and heart are not easily stirred. It is in the middle years that one's theories of short cuts to his ends get their first rude shock. The knowledge he knew would never be needed, the need of it begins to be felt. The wisdom of the counsel of all who lived before him, begins to be felt. The training he thought superfluous, the shorter way through to his end that would land him there just as well as the longer and more toilsome ways, these are likely to become evident to one in the middle years. That is, he gets the meaning for himself of what all the experience of the world before had tried to tell him. The wearisome old stuff, the advice and the counsel of the elders and of the schools, suddenly quickens into meaning as sober words of life. He gets what they were trying to say; gets it for himself; pays his own tuition for it. The world offered it as a gift. If the conclusions of the middle years, about what will be needed, could be moved back, by some miracle, to the fifteenth year, it would transform education and fill our schools with new meaning. Then there are those other interests that one misses and wishes that he had, all those acquirements and contacts that save one from being lost and a stranger when he gets outside of his particular business and business in general. The lack of these, the need of these, the worth of these, often become evident in the middle years.

Then there is the regret of the imagination. Fitted into the routine grooves by choice and circumstance, the fancy begins to play about the choices that might have been made, always with the inference that they

might have been better than those that were made. The middle years have much of this regret of the imagination. A poll of all would reveal a large per cent perhaps, who are sure that they went into the wrong business. Their natural abilities would have flowered better in another line and here they are in this. They would have been happier, richer, more influential, better known, if they had done that which they did not do, instead of this which they did do. The middle years, the first trial balance, may bring both the regret of fact and the regret of imagination.

The middle years have the task of shaping a new working philosophy to fit the changed circumstances of life. The difficulty in this period may be that the mind's interpretation of life has not adjusted to the changed conditions. The middle years have come, in fact, while the thought remains back with the period that came before. May we articulate that change? The first years have a philosophy of life that is about all trading in "futures." The normal experiences and events of life, that are just down the years, make up most of the present concern. These lighten up the whole foreground and give color to the near horizon. From them come the happy moods and they are the material upon which hope builds. Life then is full of interest, eager, expectant and self-sufficient. One's own affairs then can just about be his religion and his God. By the middle years we have come through into the last of the human relations, the son of a mother, the husband of a wife, the father of a daughter. With the successive stages, daughter and sister, wife and mother; son and brother, husband and father, we have rounded the circle and started again. The natural man has run his course. He has done about all that nature demands of her creatures and she is ready for him to

depart. To nature generally life has no meaning beyond getting a new generation into the world and upon its feet. But man's life often goes on for years after nature would be through with him. That is, every man has a life of his own for which he is responsible, beyond that which nature thinks is all. Men and women have years in which they are responsible to themselves; responsible to the world, years after the production of offspring when much of life is lived and in which much of their work is done. This part of life has to have a supporting philosophy and faith in things as they are, and as they are likely to be from that time on to the end.

As one inventories life at mid-way, he finds that the choice of occupation has been made. Presumably one is in the work that he will do to the end, and by which he will live. The first human relation, that with parents, will in all likelihood come to an end and be but a memory. The home that he has made, presumably will continue. The relation of guardian of small children will change rapidly to that of companionship with adults. The new possible relations of blood will be those of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The next event that involves great change in the order and possibilities of life, is death itself. These, just to name them, are the normal conditions and prospects at mid-way. The way of looking at life has to take them in and feel right about them. Though all the choices have been right up to that time, and all the hopes of the first years have been fulfilled up to expectation, and more, the life will change its outlook of mind to fit a new outlook of fact. Most that has come will not come again and the remainder of one's time here will be different. This is the order of life. One's view of things has to fit it.

The men said it was easier to take the trenches than to hold them. The first was quickly done. It was done with a dash; was full of action and of daring with all the elements of chance and surprise. One might be cited for bravery or meritorious action. Holding them was the long drag with not very much happening. The middle years are holding the trenches we have taken or have dug for ourselves. It is not such exciting business. Life often is full of interest and meaning when it is making new discoveries and getting into new territory and new experiences every year. When the settled country is entered where life is to be, as long as it is lived, there is more difficulty in fitting into this.

Some of the changes are these. It will be a view of life that takes in today and makes more of it.

"No longer forward or behind  
But, grateful, take the good I find,  
The best of now and here."

That is, life will not depend as much on the promises of tomorrow. It is learned by this time that today is likely to be as good as tomorrow, better not pass today. It is better to take what it has.

"The angel sought so far away,  
I welcome at my door."

We see life slipping away, always looking for some better just over the hill. One learns that today, this side of the hill, in all likelihood, is just as good, may be better. Tomorrow may bring its sorrows. Tomorrows can do that. The present things come in for more attention, lest life be passed. All the windows are opened to the day, to this day.

It will be a view that takes in routine. One cannot hope that his work will be different or less regular. He knows by this time just about what it is going to be through all the stretch ahead. Life makes the routine. One has to make a view of life that takes in routine and makes it a school of excellence. It has to be done with content, with joy if it can be, with some pride, for that is to be his contribution to the world. The middle years have to do this, take the bitter routine and relish it as daily meat.

Then, in the middle years we have to adjust ourselves to being just one among men, that is, the average man. We do not set out to be that. We are one of a large number of people. Many do their work as well and some do it better. We do not stand out above the crowd. We are one of it, in fact. That is a great shock sometimes when it comes for the first time, and one has to take that in and live with it.

The middle years have in them the conditions out of which moral breakdown and tragedy may come. This very condition of being settled into life's grooves, with no great change visible, or probable, or necessary, reacts differently upon different minds. What gives content to some, arouses rebellion in others. The codes and conventions may be challenged at this time. Middle life knows this spirit of rebellion which says, "By what authority, by whose will am I put into this treadmill of life?" This protest in our contemporary literature, about being bound, is the voice of the middle years. Youth often is radical in mind. In its theories it challenges the conventions, and the moral code, and shocks the world with its speech. But, the middle years challenge the moral code differently. When men and women set out at this time to try out a way of their own; when they say, "Who is going to

tell me how to live? The slaves to convention cannot; the settled, prosaic people cannot; the Victorians cannot, the Church cannot," this is an entirely different matter from youth talking about it. Youth is likely to deal with the theory about doing it. Middle life is more likely to do it. Youth has more regard in fact for the signs "Dangerous Passing," "Detour Here." The middle years add to the spirit of rebellion certain experience, finesse, and courage in taking chances. They add the knowledge of the ways of the world. There is a vast difference between the protesting spirit of youth shocking its elders with rebel words, as a theory for discussion, and the studied cynicism of the more practiced middle years worked into a code to live by. The middle watch knows this daring of the by-ways.

"In the midway of this our mortal life  
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray,  
Gone from the path direct."

The middle years hold for others just the opposite danger, not that of trying out new ways but that of settling into a small round from which one may never emerge until death lifts him out. The term "Settling down," goes with the middle years. And it may be in a small circle of round and round, to the office and back again. It may go on this way for years with unbroken regularity, always just that much of life and never any more. Sometimes the mind never varies more than the body in its daily and yearly round. This sometimes has all the elements of pathos and tragedy that we feel in the moral breakdown. It creeps on as a slow disease, a kind of mortal malady. The life will never get out of it. The circle draws in just a little more year by year to the end. About both, those who settle into life so narrowly, and those who go out and

defy it and squander it away, about both we feel the same, "How much they have missed."

The middle years bring one a little nearer to the realization of one of the hardest facts to face squarely and calmly. It is that his life here is not a permanent thing. He is a temporary man. That too, comes with a shock, with as much of a shock as facing the fact that he is an average man. He feels his life here not only just one of the multitude of earth but also just a moment in an eternity of time. That may not be pleasant. Death comes into the realm of easy probability, as in youth it is only in the field of remote possibility. That is the next great experience and from the middle years on, one has more reminders that it is a rather common experience among his kin, and friends and neighbors. This and kindred things come more often to men's thought by the time they are mid-way. It is one of the great matters of life and it is one of the things that men connect inevitably and logically with religion and with God. On their being true hangs man's only hope of any way out.

By this time personal limitations have become evident. Then the limitations of the whole human race come to be known and felt. One cannot go very far or very long without getting into territory where all men together are just as helpless as one is by himself. There is a point beyond which all our human kind cannot go or help. That is, one has come in his own thought and experience to a point where he needs faith and a God and he goes out to find them. He has never felt this need in just the same way before. Those who really choose a church are likely to do it at this time. They seek comradeship in their new faith and a house for themselves and their God.

